



Job 32-37: Elihu's speech

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Elihu is described as a descendant of Buz, who was a son of Nahor, Abraham's brother. God is described as **the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor** Gen 31.53. The story of Job is located in the land of Uz (chap 1), and Uz was the brother of Buz, so Elihu was from an ancient family. He was also an angry young man 32.1-5. After explaining his reticence 32.6-7 he points out that wisdom comes from the Spirit of God 32.8-9. He is now bursting to speak 32.18-20 but will be impartial and not arrogant 33.6-7.

He summarises Job's position and rebukes him 33.9-12. God doesn't find fault with us without reason – He can't be wrong. He speaks to people 33.13-18 to turn them away from sin. That is his purpose; it is for their good. 33v19-25 God sometimes permits desperate illness so that a person can repent and be saved from death and brought to praise God as a result of their recovery. C.S Lewis: "We can rest contentedly in our sins....But pain insists on being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a dead world." God's purpose is to bring joy and wellbeing from realising who God is 33.26. Penitents will witness to others in a very striking way 33v27-28. **I did not get what I deserved.** A clear and dramatic glimpse in the OT of grace – the undeserved kindness of God to the repentant sinner. And God is patient 33v29-30. Elihu gets well beyond the idea that God simply inflicts or allows suffering as a punishment for sin and he sees a constructive purpose in our suffering.

However, he has already criticised Job in 33.12-14 and at the beginning of chap. Elihu disappointingly launches into a particularly harsh condemnation of Job 34.5-9 and condemns him again in less harsh terms in 34.35-37 and 36.16-21. Elihu vigorously upholds the righteousness of God, but seems to have lost the insights he had earlier, and to consider only a suffering which is a punishment for sin 34.10-11. Note Jesus on this point in Lk 13v4. Elihu implies that Job can't possibly be right and he goes on to expound the righteousness and power of God in 34v13-20 and warns Job that he can't avoid God 34v21-22. The rest of chapter 34 is a passionate but incomplete exposition of the character and activities of God, ending with another withering attack on Job 34v36-37.

Chapter 35 continues on a different tack, claiming 35v6-7 that God is unaffected by human goodness or wickedness - a half-truth at best. In chapter 36 Elihu returns to the theme that suffering can be to correct us and bring us happiness 36v8-15 and spiritual understanding. "Job, God's purpose in your suffering is to bring you into blessing 36v16-17."

Now in the last part of chapter 36 and in chapter 37 he turns to focus on God, expressing a great vision of God which prepares us for the Lord's intervention in chapter 38. 36v26 **How great is God – beyond our understanding! The number of his years is past finding out.** 36v27-33 illustrates this by describing how God controls the weather, and how we have no understanding of how he does it. Of course today we know far more about how the weather works than they did in those days, but that doesn't diminish our vision of the greatness of God: unravelling natural law doesn't explain where that law came from.

And then in chap. 37 he expands the theme of the God of creation into a magnificent exposition of the power and wonder of the Lord of the universe. 37v1-2 **At this my heart pounds and leaps from its place. Listen! Listen to the roar of his voice, to the rumbling that comes from his mouth.**

Then Elihu turns to Job in 37v14 and asks him to consider his human limitations, concluding with 37v23 **²³ The Almighty is beyond our reach and exalted in power; - but he is also just and righteous and kind - in his justice and great righteousness, he does not oppress.**

So Elihu prepares us for what the Lord is going to say in the next four chapters. But Elihu has failed to answer Job's questions because he has argued from a limited understanding of the ways of God. At that time his theology could not go as far as understanding the suffering of truly innocent people.

He had valuable insights and a great appreciation of the majesty and greatness of God, but he could not see into heaven and therefore could not know what we know from the first two chapters of this book about the purposes of God in Job's sufferings, the sufferings of an innocent man.

In spite of his shortcomings, in many ways Elihu rises above Job's three friends and it is noteworthy that in the final chapter God does not refer to him, express any anger against him or instruct him to get Job to make a sacrifice for him. His emphasis is on God's desire to bless. However, he fails to see that as human beings we cannot answer all the 'why' questions in this life, even if we do really grasp the love, goodness, power and grace of God. Even though we have insights that Elihu could not have, there are still many perplexities in life; but one day we shall understand them all 1 Cor 13.12b: **Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.**

So what can Elihu tell us?

- 1 That suffering is not necessarily a punishment and it can have a very benign purpose, however unpleasant it may be at the time.
- 2 That God responds to repentance for sin by withholding the punishment that we deserve and greatly blessing us - **I did not get what I deserved 33.27b.**
- 3 God is great, powerful, majestic and glorious beyond our imagining and we have to approach our questions and problems from that viewpoint.
- 4 And v23 of Elihu's last chapter he assures us that although the **Almighty is beyond our reach and exalted in power, in his justice and great righteousness, he does not oppress.**

Recommended reference: Out of the Storm – Grappling with God in the book of Job
Christopher Ash IVP 2004